



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release November 6, 1984

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TWO MORE WHOOPING CRANES DIE AT PATUXENT; BIOLOGISTS SUSPECT VIRUS

INJURED WILD WHOOPING CRANE AIRLIFTED TO NATIONAL ZOO

Two more endangered whooping cranes in the captive breeding flock at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, died on November 3 and 4, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. The weekend deaths brought to seven the total number of birds that have died at Patuxent since mid-September.

Laboratory results that have just been received on tissue samples from some of the dead birds indicate the deaths are due to a virus identified jointly by the Service's National Wildlife Health Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, and the Department of Agriculture's National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, Iowa.

The virus, called a "toga" virus, is known to occur in the wild and is thought to be transmitted by insects. As with any virus, there is no specific treatment. Patuxent biologists have ordered antiviral drugs and are keeping the birds warm and rested in an attempt to prevent any further spread of the virus.

The two most recent deaths were a 5-year-old male crane that died on Saturday, November 3, and a 2-year-old female crane that died on Sunday, November 4.

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Because of the laboratory results indicating the presence of the virus, biologists took blood samples from the 32 remaining members of the Patuxent flock on November 4. The samples are being analyzed to determine whether the remaining birds have developed antibodies to the virus.

Necropsies have been performed on the carcasses and a strict quarantine on the captive flock remains in effect. To date, none of the sandhill cranes also kept at Patuxent have shown signs of the disease.

The captive breeding flock at Patuxent represents a cornerstone in the ongoing effort to restore populations of the whooping crane in the wild. Offspring from the captive birds are used to supplement an experimental wild flock at Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Idaho. A second, larger wild flock migrates between northern Alberta and Texas.

In an unrelated development, biologists captured an injured wild whooping crane last week and airlifted it to Washington, D.C., this past weekend, where it is now under the care of the National Zoo. The young adult bird, thought to be a male, suffered an injured wing during its migration from Canada to Texas with another adult and a juvenile crane.

The crane was discovered near Linton, North Dakota, on October 31 by a local citizen who reported that the bird seemed inactive. After 2 days of observation by members of the Fish and Wildlife Service and the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, the bird was captured to allow biologists to care for its wing and to prevent coyotes in the areas from attacking the crane. It was taken to Bismarck, North Dakota, on November 2, where its injury was diagnosed as a compound fracture in the mid-section of its left wing. Biologists do not know what caused the injury.

The crane was flown to Minneapolis and then to Washington, D.C., on November 3. It is now under quarantine at the National Zoo Veterinary hospital, where its wound has been X-rayed, cleaned, and packed, and the bird treated with antibiotics.